Ειδική Ενότητα

Special Section

FUNERARY ART IN THE EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN: THE HELLENISTIC NECROPOLEIS OF ALEXANDRIA

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Some thoughts on the "Hellenistic Necropolis"

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ABSTRACT

As a key element in the urban landscape of the Hellenistic period, the "Hellenistic necropolis" functioned not only as a burial ground, but also as a field on which social status, identity, and the interplay of cultural influences were represented. Drawing from observations on the architectural forms, layout, and cultural significance of notable necropoleis such as those at Alexandria and Aigai, these notes, part of the author's forthcoming monograph on death and burial in Hellenistic period, stress how the "Hellenistic necropolis" reflects the Hellenistic world's multifaceted nature. Furthermore, the influence of local customs and multiculturalism on funerary architecture, and the broader implications of necropoleis for understanding social hierarchy and cultural memory are examined.

INTRODUCTION

The Hellenistic period, spanning from the death of Alexander the Great in 323 BCE to the Roman conquest in 31 BCE, was marked by the diffusion of Greek culture across a vast territory, including Egypt, the Near East, and parts of Central Asia. This period saw significant transformations in urban planning, art, and architecture that sometimes only became visible much later, in the 1st and 2nd centuries CE (e.g., Chaniotis 2018), or outside the strict political confines of the Hellenistic Oikoumene in places like Southern Italy (Fig. 1). Among these developments were the large-scale necropoleis –cities of the dead– constructed in newly founded Hellenistic cities. These necropoleis, located on the outskirts of urban centers, were not only burial grounds, but also places of remembrance, social stratification, and cultural exchange. This paper aims to discuss the architectural forms and layouts of Hellenistic necropoleis and their cultural and social roles in Hellenistic society. Through a survey of spatial organization, typology of tombs, and decorative elements, this study highlights the role of necropoleis in expressing power, identity, and cultural syncretism in the Hellenistic world, and comprises a small part of the author's forthcoming monograph on death and burial in Hellenistic Greece.

THE HELLENISTIC WORLD AND ITS URBAN DEVELOPMENT

The vast territories conquered by Alexander the Great led to the establishment of new cities that became centers of Greek culture, trade, and governance. These cities, such as Alexandria, Antioch, and Pergamon, were marked by a complex blend of Greek and local influences, producing a cosmopolitan environment. Urban planning

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Fig. 1. Ipogeo C, Ipogeo dei Cristallini, Napoli, Italy (© N. Dimakis).

followed Greek principles, including the Hippodamian grid system, which was adapted to the needs of larger, multicultural populations. In parallel with the construction of monumental public buildings and temples (e.g., Iliopoulou 2019), the urban design extended to the creation of necropoleis. These spaces were carefully planned and often reflected the social stratification of the living population. The monumentalization of tombs in Hellenistic necropoleis mirrored the rise of wealthy elites and the importance of personal and familial legacy, particularly in the context of the emerging monarchies and aristocratic rule.

FUNERARY PRACTICES AND BELIEFS

Hellenistic funerary practices were deeply rooted in Greek traditions but were also influenced by the cultural and religious practices of the regions into which Hellenistic rule expanded. The burial of the dead, the construction of monumental tombs, and the rituals associated with death and the afterlife were central to expressing an individual's social identity (e.g., Dimakis 2016). Elite families invested in grand tombs to assert their status and ensure their remembrance (e.g., Campanelli 2017).

Religious beliefs about the afterlife varied, with influences from Greek, Persian, Egyptian, and local traditions (Dimakis 2024). For example, the Egyptian concept of the afterlife was integrated into the architecture and decoration of some Hellenistic tombs in Egypt, while Persian Zoroastrian burial practices influenced the form of tombs in Anatolia (e.g., see Colburn 2020). Despite this diversity, the overarching aim of funerary monuments remained consistent: to honor the deceased and ensure their place in collective memory.

FORM AND LAYOUT OF THE HELLENISTIC NECROPOLEIS

The term "necropolis" (the "city of the dead" in Greek) derives from Strabo, who visited Alexandria around 30–25 BCE. He referred to the area west of the cemeteries as "the suburb of the Necropolis", a designated place where the Alexandrian society of the living and the collective world of their dead converged (Strabo, *Geography*, XVII, 1. 10). In this same location, funeral and religious rituals were performed alongside simple daily activities. In modern research, the term "necropolis" is misleadingly used to describe common cemeteries, while the essence of the term lies in describing burial spaces where the boundaries between the living and the dead are unclear. Hellenistic necropoleis (plural) were typically located outside city limits, on their outskirts or outside the city walls, adhering to ancient Greek customs that prohibited burials within city limits to maintain public health, religious sanctity and the need for separation of the living from the polluting dead (Fig. 2). The layout of Hellenistic necropoleis typically followed the organizational principles of the cities they served, and often reflected their habitation sequence. Many necropoleis were arranged along major roadways leading out of the city gates, often reflecting a radial or grid pattern that mirrored the city's own spatial planning. This alignment with the urban structure highlights the necropolis's role as an extension of the city itself, reinforcing the continuity between the world of the living and the world of the dead which actually contradicts the frequently asserted by modern scholars "ancient Greek prohibitions", thus highlighting that our overreliance on single sided theories arranged along the dual schemes of good/bad, sacred/profane, dead/living etc., is not always trustworthy, or at least not corroborated by the burial evidence itself (e.g., see Parker 1983).

Accessibility to burial grounds was of major concern in Hellenistic Greece; access for the ekphora, the second part of the three-act drama of the ancient Greek funeral, which could entail a pompe (procession) of several hundred meters from the settlement and the house of the dead, was certainly facilitated in this way. Even a few hundred meters distance through rough fields is quite a long way to transport a body considering the slow walking pace for the performance of lament and for the elderly to keep on track. If funerals did indeed take place before dawn, as written sources inform us, when visibility was rather low, then the effort would have been even greater. Hellenistic cemeteries are therefore placed alongside roads and in relatively flat areas. It is probable that this association of cemeteries with roads was mainly down to sheer convenience rather than anything else.

Major tombs, especially those of elite individuals or royal families, were frequently positioned along central roads or near the entrances to the necropolis (Fig. 3). This axial arrangement created a processional path for visitors, emphasizing the importance of certain individuals in the social hierarchy. In contrast, common graves were often located on the periphery, reflecting the social stratification within the necropolis. The general layout indeed featured a network of pathways and avenues, facilitating easy navigation through the necropolis.

The separation of burial areas within the necropolis –where monumental tombs were located closer to main thoroughfares and simpler graves were pushed to the edges– also mirrored social divisions in Hellenistic society. This spatial organization allowed for the public display of wealth and status, with the more elaborate and visible tombs serving as constant reminders of the deceased's social position.

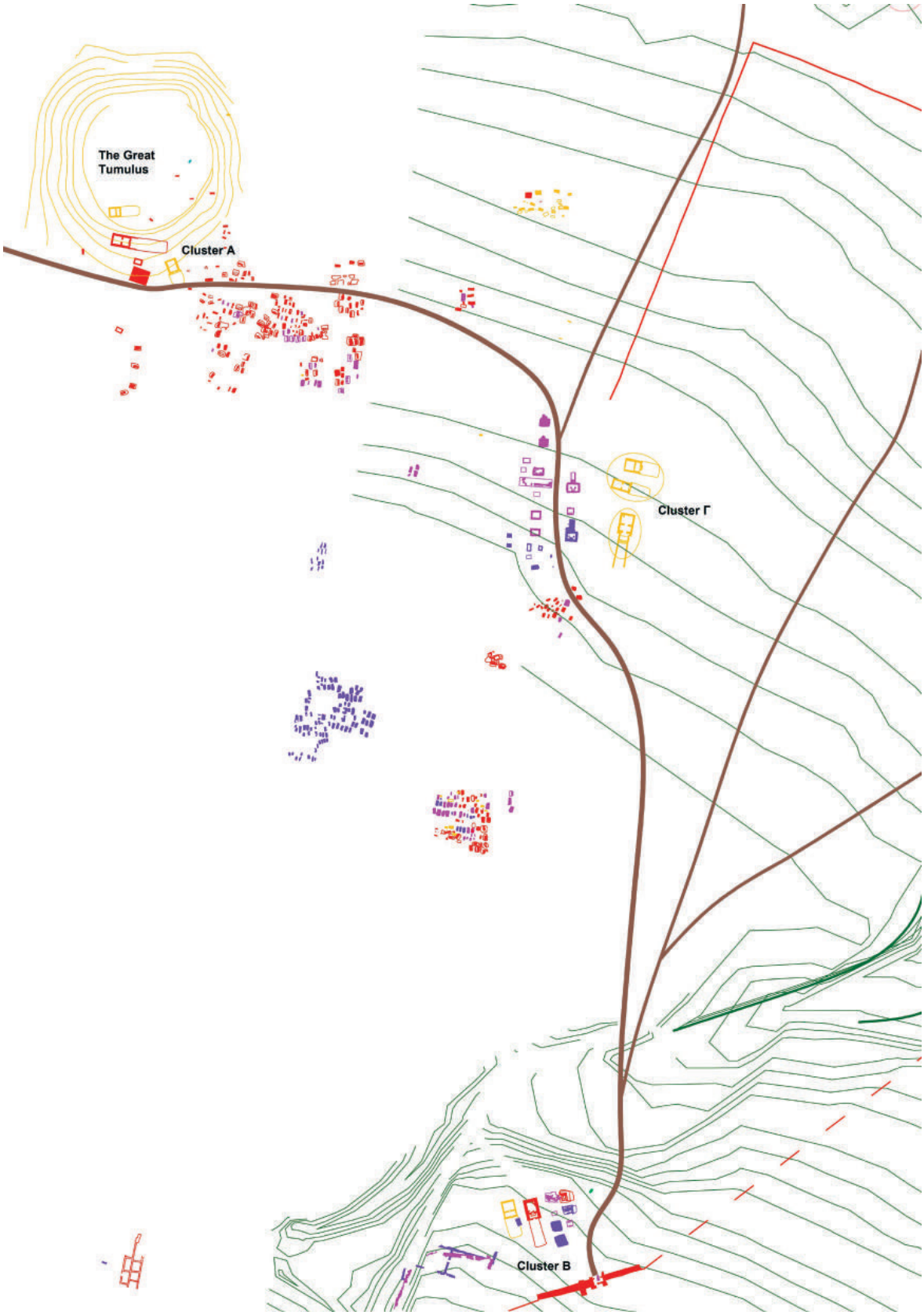

Fig. 2. The SW part of the necropolis at Aigai in Macedonia, Greece (© Kottaridi 2020, 28, fig. 1).

Fig. 3. Diaphenes tumulus at Aigai in the Yunusemre district of Manisa, Turkey (© http://www.nekropergeol.org/en/sites.html [accessed on 26/1/2025]).

MORTUARY VARIABILITY

Already by the mid-4th century BCE a tendency towards simple and rather inexpensive grave forms seems to emerge in every region in the broadly defined "Greek world" (Dimakis 2016). Simple pit graves would have been modest; conglomerate was sometimes used as a lid, although relatively flat stone slabs were more frequent. Burials in tile graves, however, was a very popular way of disposing off the dead, while they were certainly cheap. By the Hellenistic period the dead were buried in tile graves in most parts of the Greek world, suggesting that the tile grave was probably not a grave form employed by a specific social group, but rather a trend imposed by economic even intrinsic choices. This is not surprising; at any given moment a society may include more than one grave type without the people themselves making any distinction between them.

In addition to the rather simple and unremarkable grave forms, however, various monumental tombs of considerable wealth and splendor were increasingly constructed by the late-fourth century BCE (e.g., see Fedak 1990; Venit 2002; Gortzelany 2019; Berns and Huguenot 2020). By the term "monumental tombs" here I refer to a rather heterogeneous group of large, mainly free standing burial monuments of considerable expenditure and rareness that seem to embrace the concept of "monumentality" and that are composed of a number of elements to qualify the denotation; for something to be monumental in the context of the ancient world, it must be made of a durable material, display a high level of technical achievement (of course relative to the period) and to be of a "monumental" size; lastly, monumentality usually possesses a ritualistic element relating to its use. These burial monuments may vary from large peribolos tombs and small size chamber tombs to larger burial complexes and Macedonian tombs, that were used for both individual and multiple burials distributed in numerous sarcophagi against their internal walls. Such tombs are extremely rare in earlier periods of time in Greece, in contrast to the Hellenistic when they are widely dispersed. They are in urban or peripheral cemeteries, or in isolation, and in rather prominent places such as alongside roads, amid or overseeing arable land.

Fig. 4. Hypogea and simpler burial forms lying side by side at the cemetery of Shatby, Alexandria, Egypt (© Breccia 1912).

If we regard the effect of permanence monumental tombs were provided with due to their large-scale construction as aiming to memorialize their owners' status as prominent individuals, then these people must have been members of the spending, and rather heterogeneous, Hellenistic "elite". Possessors, or at least representatives, of political, religious, economic or symbolic power derived their wealth mainly from extensive landholdings, but also from trade, taxes, harbor dues, royal donations etc., and were able of even helping a city in military or financial extremity. Be they urban bourgeoisie and/or wealthy landlords, those buried in monumental tombs used the same eloquent means, monumental tombs, for promoting their political and territorial claims in a period, the Hellenistic, when these were of considerable importance. Since some of these tombs contained multiple burials, these claims were also transferable or were not solely relating to individuals. To the extent that the task of building large-scale tombs required a long-term commitment as well as the ability to control resources and coordinate substantial investments of labor, monumental tombs could also be regarded as placed where the economic and social focus of their owners were; burial at a "central place" could be equated with reflecting elite regard for urban life, and burial at a remote location with landholding. Their placement, next to or even far from modest grave types, functioned as an additional mode of appraisal, creating hierarchical relationships among the dead; e.g., those buried in the burial complexes (Hypogea) at Shatby in Alexandria were emphatically separated from those buried around them in simpler grave forms (Breccia 1912; Rummel and Schmidt 2019) (Fig. 4). It is thus made possible to assume that in the Hellenistic period monumental tombs created a sense of group identity, or even of distinct identities. The combination of architectural grandeur and elaborate decoration served both a commemorative and political function, reinforcing the power and influence of those buried therein.

Fig. 5. Hypogeum I at Mustapha Kamel, Alexandria, Egypt (© N. Dimakis).

THE CULTURAL AND SOCIAL SIGNIFICANCE OF THE HELLENISTIC NECROPOLIS

One of the defining features of the Hellenistic necropolis was the blending of Greek, Persian, Egyptian, and local architectural and artistic traditions. This cultural syncretism is particularly evident in the necropolis at Alexandria, where tombs exhibit a fusion of Greek and Egyptian elements (e.g., Empereur and Nenna 2001, 2003). Hypogeum I at Mustapha Kamel, for instance, combines Greek architectural forms with Egyptian motifs, reflecting the city's multicultural population (Fig. 5) (e.g., see Adriani 1936; Bonacasa and Minà 2015). Similarly, the necropolis at Petra demonstrates a blend of Greek and Nabataean styles, with rock-cut tombs featuring classical Greek façades alongside local architectural motifs. This synthesis of styles highlights the cosmopolitan nature of Hellenistic society, where cultural exchange was a fundamental aspect of life.

Examining the layout of Hellenistic necropoleis reveals profound cultural and social implications that extend beyond mere funerary practices. The spatial organization of these burial grounds reflects a complex interplay between the individual, community, and the divine. Interments often occurred within meticulous clusters, suggesting that kinship ties and familial identities were paramount, allowing for the celebration of familial legacies. Moreover, the architectural styles and ornamentations found in these necropoleis highlight the wealth and social stratification of the deceased, embodying the aspirations and values of society at large. Memorial structures served not only as final resting places but also as pedagogical sites for the living, imparting narratives of glory and remembrance, hence reinforcing communal bonds and collective memory (Fig. 6). Consequently, the arrangement of Hellenistic necropoleis encapsulates a rich tapestry of societal ideals, encapsulating how cultural norms and identities were articulated through spatial and material expressions. The necropoleis of the Hellenistic period were more than just burial grounds; they were dynamic cultural landscapes that reflected the social, political, and religious values of the time. Through their monumental architecture, spatial organization, and artistic decoration, these necropoleis served as both places of commemoration and as public statements of power and identity.

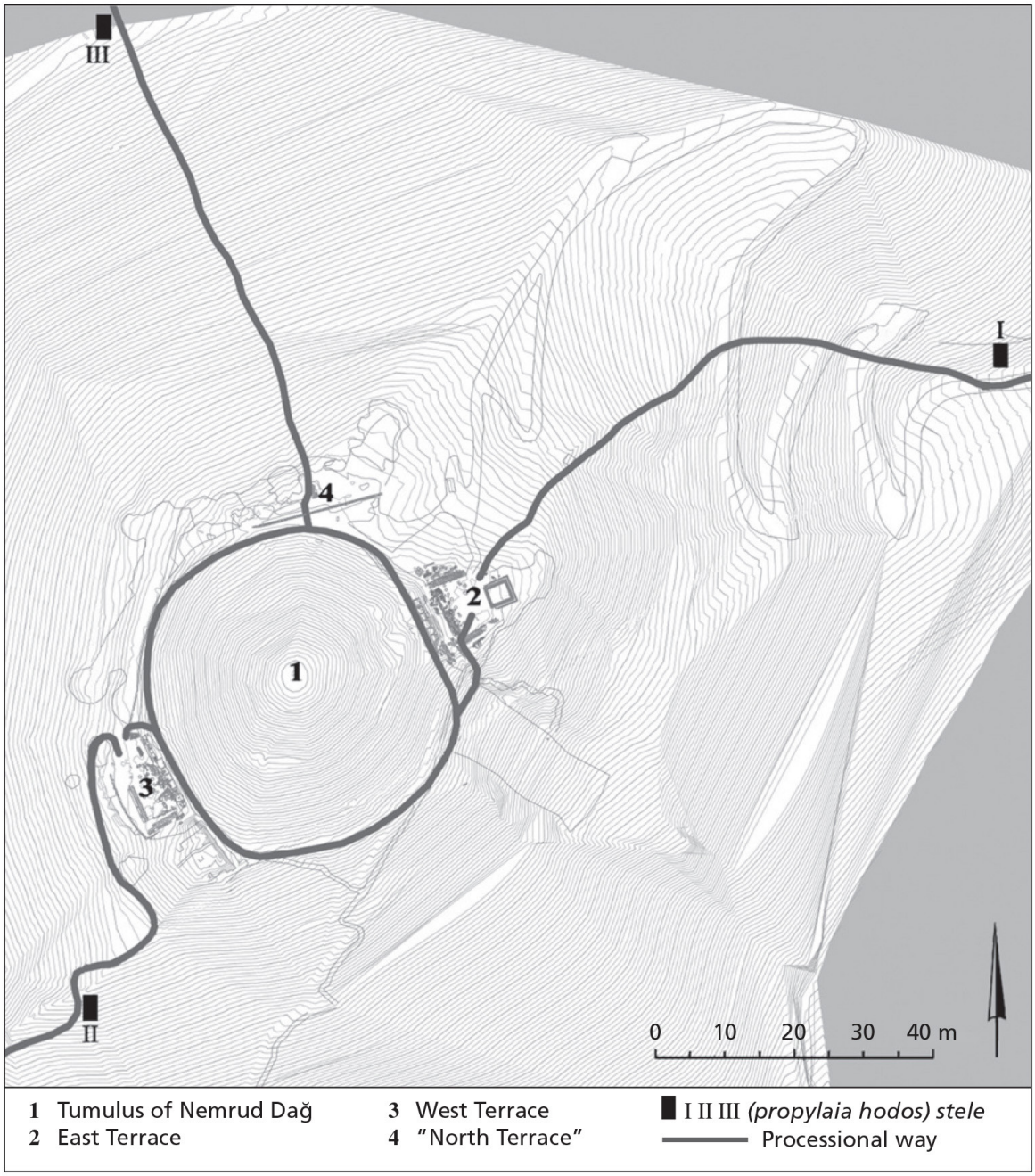

Fig. 6. Contour map of the Hierothesion of Antiochos I of Commagene with a reconstruction of the processional roads and the entrance stelai, Nemrud Dağı, Turkey (© Versluys 2017, 57, fig. 2.10).

The variety of tomb forms, from rock-cut tombs to grand mausolea, illustrates the diversity of influences that shaped Hellenistic funerary practices. At the same time, the consistent emphasis on the commemoration of the elite underscores the importance of status and legacy in Hellenistic society. As a result, Hellenistic necropoleis offer valuable insights into the complexities of urban planning, social hierarchy, and cultural identity in the ancient world.

In this brief discussion of the Hellenistic necropoleis' main features, one quickly recognizes their multifaceted roles in the societies that constructed them. These extensive burial grounds were not merely functional spaces for interring the dead; rather, they emerged as significant cultural landscapes that reflected the sociopolitical structures and religious beliefs of their time. The careful planning and elaborate designs of these necropoleis –

often incorporating monumental tombs, intricate sculptures, and a variety of grave goods– indicate a profound respect for the dead and a desire to communicate social status and familial legacy. Ensuring that the deceased transitioned appropriately into the afterlife was of paramount importance, thereby influencing the architectural choices and burial practices within these sites. Thus, Hellenistic necropoleis serve as essential markers of identity and continuity in a rapidly changing world, underscoring the interconnectedness of life, death, and community.

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